



“Examining the Syrian Humanitarian Crisis from the Ground”
Testimony for the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa

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Bernice G. Romero, Senior Director, Public Policy and Advocacy, International Humanitarian Response

I want to thank Chairman Ros-Lehtinen and Ranking Member Deutch for organizing today’s hearing on the humanitarian crisis in Syria. We sincerely appreciate the time and attention that you have dedicated to this crisis.

A single picture of a lifeless child focused the world’s attention last month on a crisis that has reached not just Europe’s shores, but all of Syria and its neighboring countries over the last four years. Sadly, many of the issues I raised during my testimony before this committee last year are still valid, as the situation has continued to rapidly deteriorate. Now in its fifth year and with no political solution on the horizon, the Syria conflict has been characterized by the UN Secretary-General as the largest humanitarian and peace and security crisis in the world today. More than 250,000 people have been killed including over 11,000 children, and more than one million have been injured. The UN estimates that 12.2 million people inside Syria are in need of assistance, including more than 5.7 million children.

We know first-hand the urgency of the situation. Save the Children programs are already serving millions of displaced people and refugees across the Middle East, including in Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Turkey, Jordan, Iraq and Yemen. We have reached over 3 million people – including 2 million children -- inside Syria and in neighboring countries since the conflict began.

My recommendations to Congress and the Administration today draw upon Save the Children’s experience working to address the needs of children and families affected by the Syrian crisis. Today I will focus on four issues. First, I will discuss the importance of increasing the annual ceiling for refugee admissions over the next two fiscal years to ensure that the US is a leader in helping those fleeing violence in Syria and other parts of the world find refuge. Second, I will discuss some of the overwhelming challenges Syrian children and their families are facing in the wake of nearly five years of conflict including attacks on schools inside Syria and increasingly difficult living conditions in neighboring countries. Third, I will talk about the importance of robustly funding humanitarian accounts to ensure that lifesaving assistance is available for families and children affected by the crisis. Finally, I will conclude by calling on the U.S. government to take action now to find a political solution to end this brutal conflict.

RESETTLEMENT

Earlier this month, 34 refugees, almost half of them babies and children, drowned when their boat sank off a Greek island. Four babies, six boys and five girls died when the wooden vessel carrying them overturned. Tens of thousands of mainly Syrian refugees have braved rough seas this year to make the short but precarious journey from Turkey to Greece's eastern islands, mainly in flimsy and overcrowded inflatable dinghies.

This tragic incident underscores that the Syrian conflict – which has created the largest displacement crisis in the world today – has taken a heavy toll on children, who have fled bombs, bullets and torture in warzones like Syria, only to drown in European waters. After nearly five years of conflict, more than 4 million refugees – over half of whom are children – have fled the violence in Syria in hopes of finding a better life.

Given the scale of this crisis, the US must do better than take a “business as usual” approach, by increasing the resettlement of Syrian refugees. The recent White House announcement that the Administration will increase the cap on the number of refugees it admits to 85,000 in the coming fiscal year is a step in the right direction, but much more must be done. Specifically, Save the Children is calling on the Administration to resettle 100,000 Syrian refugees and raise the overall cap to 200,000 in the next fiscal year. Last month, 72 Members of the House of Representatives sent a letter to President Obama expressing support for this policy and we hope the Administration will build on this political support by accommodating additional numbers of those fleeing violence and turmoil. In the past, the United States welcomed more than 700,000 refugees from Vietnam and other parts of Southeast Asia. This is the kind of bold leadership we need from the United States today.

ATTACKS ON EDUCATION

While resettling additional numbers of Syrian refugees can help relieve some of the suffering, we know that unless action is taken to tackle the root causes of why people are taking such desperate measures in the first place, that people will continue to be forced to flee. One factor contributing to the exodus from Syria is the growing insecurity inside the country, including the rise in the attacks on and military use of schools.

Through our work supporting schools in northern Syrian, we have heard from parents and children about the devastating impact of attacks on education inside Syria. Over the last two years, Save the Children has recorded 51 incidents of attacks on and military use of schools affecting schools supported through Save the Children programs in Aleppo, Idleb and Hama Governorates. These attacks include 32 airstrikes affecting our schools, as well as cases of arson, forced entry of armed men into school buildings, shootings and threats against teachers and students. Given the security and access challenges in documenting these cases, it is likely that many more incidents go unreported and the number of cases may be much higher.

One example of such an attack occurred in April of this year, when a barrel bomb damaged a primary school run by a Save the Children partner in Aleppo, forcing 700 children to be evacuated. Last year, three schools we support in Idleb governorate were so severely damaged that they had to

be rebuilt. You can see a picture of one of these schools here – this school, supported by Save the Children in the Idleb suburbs in Northern Syria, was attacked and bombed three times. Save the Children rehabilitated the school twice, but after the third bombing – including a missile strike that landed on the school playground – the school was so badly damaged that it was deemed no longer safe and can no longer be used.

In yet another incident, one student we spoke to suffered severe injuries and lost his hand when his school in Northern Syria was attacked in March of this year. Children were taking a morning break from their exams when two missiles fell on the school. One fell just outside the school's gate, killing five children and injuring fifty more. The other missile fell on the teachers' room, killing three teachers and injuring six others.

The military use of schools in Syria is also prevalent and having a negative impact on children. More than 1,000 schools inside Syria have been used as temporary bases, military staging grounds or detention or torture centers. Syrian families have informed Save the Children staff that when a school is used by armed forces or armed groups, it is recorded, reported and marked as a "military base," with the result that the school may be targeted in the future, even after the school has been vacated by fighting forces. For example, in an assessment conducted by Save the Children in northern Syria in June 2015, one-quarter of the schools visited had been used for military purposes and subsequently attacked, resulting in varying degrees of damage. At a time when there are already inadequate opportunities to access quality education in Syria, such damage to schools further hampers students' educational prospects and their futures. Moreover, seeing a school occupied by an armed force or group can also make children fearful of returning to class even when the school has been vacated.

The blatant targeting of innocent children through attacks on schools and the military use of schools is taking a toll on Syria's children who have expressed their strong desire to be protected. One child said to us, "I love animals and especially turtles because they have a very strong shield on their back to protect themselves against everything, even the missiles, and when they hear an airplane they can just hide in their shield and they will be safe. I wish we could have a shield like them because then no one would die and we could go to school every day even if there was an airplane in the sky."

In conflict and insecurity, maintaining access to education is of vital importance for children's protection and development. Education can help protect children from recruitment and sexual violence by armed groups, from being forced into the worst forms of child labor and from having to enter into early marriage. When schools are safe from attack and other threats, they can provide an important sense of normalcy that is crucial to a child's well-being, and can help provide important safety information and services.

Despite the challenges, it is still possible to delivery education in Syria with the right political will and resources. Save the Children is currently supporting 53 schools in northern Syria and our experience shows that with the appropriate community engagement, robust security analysis, investments that allow adaptations to school infrastructure, teacher training, a flexible approach to delivering learning and appropriate levels of psychosocial support, children can continue to access

education. Funding for these activities would help allow education to continue even under the most difficult circumstances and is an investment in the future of Syria's children, and the future of Syria.

If continued access to quality education is to be achieved, however, it must also be accompanied by increased pressure on parties to the conflict to cease attacks on and end the military use of schools. To this end, Save the Children calls on the U.S. government to:

- Pressure parties to the conflict to immediately and fully implement the provisions of UN Security Resolutions 2139, 2165, and 2191(2014) in order to demilitarize schools and stop attacks on educational facilities.
- Denounce attacks on and the military use of schools by all parties to the conflict in Syria and speak out against the use of explosive weapons in populated areas.
- Support the establishment of a protection monitoring body comprised of UN technical experts to gather information inside Syria about attacks against civilians and civilian objects, including attacks on schools, and take further diplomatic measures against parties to the conflict in the case of non-compliance.
- Prioritize and fully fund education programming, including investment in alternative options for children to pursue their education if schools remain closed or are unsafe. Funding should prioritize increasing the number of trained teachers and supporting teachers to deliver alternative education services such as, where necessary, distance and/or home-based learning.

SITUATION IN NEIGHBORING COUNTRIES

At the same time as insecurity is rising inside Syria, the situation for refugee and host communities in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq and Egypt is deteriorating rapidly and becoming increasingly difficult and unsustainable.

Governments and communities in host countries continue to show extraordinary generosity but are reaching a breaking point. Strains on infrastructure and public services, security concerns, and fears over the long-term presence of refugees have led governments to put in place greater restrictions aimed at stemming the flow of asylum seekers and encouraging refugees in-country to return to Syria or to seek asylum in third countries.

Currently, many borders are effectively closed to children and their families trying to flee Syria. It is estimated that hundreds of thousands of children are living in informal camps or with host families near or even on the borders of neighboring countries.

Refugees in neighboring countries now find it harder than ever to renew residency visas or registration with government authorities. For example, in Lebanon, 70 percent of Syrian refugees currently lack valid residency status. Limited legal status for refugees leads to reduced access to basic services, assistance and livelihoods opportunities. Without papers, refugees are unable to register marriages and births, increasing children's risk of statelessness.

Most refugees are unable to access legal income earning opportunities to meet daily needs and contribute to the host community economy. As a result, refugees are routinely forced to accept

work in the informal economy often in abusive conditions, with the constant risk of detention and even deportation. The rise in the number of refugees forced to work in the informal economy in turn drives down wages and contributes to social tensions.

I have already outlined how education in Syria is under attack. Education for refugee children in neighboring countries is also at risk, with the majority of refugee children not attending schools. More than 700,000 refugee children in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt are out of school because national education systems cannot cope with the influx of students.

Legal restrictions, coupled with decreasing levels of humanitarian assistance are pushing refugee families further into destitution and heightening associated child protection risks. 86 percent of Syrian refugees living outside of formal camps in Jordan are living below the Jordanian poverty line, and 70 percent of all Syrian refugees in Lebanon are living below the Lebanese poverty line with 50 percent below the survival level. With ever shrinking prospects for their children, families are increasingly left with no alternative but to:

- Rely on negative coping mechanisms such as reduced food intake, child labor, early marriage, sex in exchange for money or food and child recruitment.
- Seek asylum in Europe through dangerous routes: 34 percent of asylum-seekers who reached EU countries by sea in the first half of 2015 were from Syria; or
- Consider unsafe return to Syria where conflict rages on.

To ensure both the protection of refugee children and stability in neighboring countries, we urge the U.S. government to:

- Develop, together with host countries, a resilience agenda, that combines humanitarian support to the most vulnerable with a comprehensive package of development, that includes increased investment in key economic sectors aligned with national development plans and inclusive livelihoods programming to boost employment opportunities for affected communities.
- Encourage host governments to uphold their international obligations and ensure that the right to seek asylum is respected without discrimination, including guarantees not to face *refoulement*.
- Influence host governments to develop administrative procedures that allow refugees to obtain and retain residency and civil documentation such as marriage and birth certificates.
- Urge host governments to help refugees from Syria access basic livelihoods, including reduced barriers to work in sectors where there is a demand in the labor market.
- Champion the No Lost Generation Initiative. Save the Children has joined together with UNICEF, UNHCR, World Vision, Mercy Corps and other partners in the “No Lost Generation” campaign to address the enormous humanitarian needs of children in the region. With this initiative, we seek to accelerate donor and public support for programs that help Syrian children inside and outside of the country to gain access to quality education, protect them from violence and abuse, provide counseling and psychological support, and meet other critical needs.

FUNDING

The generous support offered by many donors to date is insufficient in the face of ever increasing needs in this prolonged crisis. Needs are outstripping available resources in every country and across every sector. Humanitarian assistance is being cut without a compensating increase in opportunities for families to earn income. The funding appeal to meet the needs inside Syria is only 33 percent funded and the refugee appeal is only 46 percent met. Traditional ways of providing development funding have not been tailored to respond to a protracted crisis in middle-income countries.

The US has been a generous donor and this leadership needs to continue, through both robustly funded humanitarian assistance programs and long term resources for Syria and neighboring countries. This assistance should include a special focus on providing quality education for refugee children and employment opportunities in host countries. Specifically, Save the Children calls for the U.S. government to allocate no less than \$3.059 billion for the Migration and Refugee Assistance Account and \$1.895 billion for the International Disaster Assistance Account in FY16. In addition, we urge Congress to consider emergency funding for a two-pronged strategy to provide immediate humanitarian relief and to increase the capacity of the Department of State and Department of Homeland Security to manage the 200,000 target for FY 2016 refugee admissions into the United States.

PROTECT CHILDREN THROUGH DIPLOMATIC ACTION

Ultimately, ending the conflict in Syria is the only way to end the refugee flow and build a better future for Syria's children. The US and other world leaders need to step up efforts to find an end to the conflict and violence in Syria in the near term – without that, all other measures are only stop gaps and children and their families will continue to suffer. The US needs to prioritize a reinvigorated peace process that supports the UN and brings in key regional stakeholders to drive forward a diplomatic conclusion. Decisive action by the international community is needed now to facilitate a peaceful end to the violence.

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I would like to thank the subcommittee for the opportunity to present testimony on this important issue. Save the Children lauds the US for the leadership it has shown so far, but the scale of the global displacement crisis demands even more urgent and escalated action. We look forward to working with Congress to help the next generation of Syrians who are seeking a better life.